

# **Communalisation of Muslims in Sri Lanka**

**An Historical Perspective**

**By**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this paper is to provide a historical overview of the processes of communal identity formation in Sri Lanka with special reference to the Muslim community(1). Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic society in which Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and others have coexisted for centuries. However, in more recent times, ethnic relations on the Island have been consistently strained by the rise of communalist politics which have deepened ethnic and religious divides. Of course, communalisation and the rise of identity politics are not unique to Sri Lanka. Ethnic and religious identitarianism has acquired unprecedented importance in various parts of the world.

It is widely recognised that communal identity formation is a cultural-ideological process. However, this process is driven by conflicts over the distribution of political power and opportunities for and benefits of development among the different communities. The ideological fashioning of exclusive communal identities takes place in an environment of interaction generally characterised by

mutual hostility. This interaction also provides models of myth making and identity moulding which the ideologues of one community may borrow from the other.

The Lankan polity and society appear to be divided into four main communal blocks: Sinhalese, whose identity is articulated in Sinhala Buddhist terms although there is a Christian minority among them; Tamils whose identity is defined linguistically and territorially with reference to a traditional homeland in the North and East although a considerable number of them are settled outside this region; Upcountry Tamils who are differentiated from the other Tamils because of their more recent Indian origin and geographic location in the plantation areas of the upcountry; and Muslims whose identity is expressed in religious terms and comprise Moors and Malays settled throughout the country with the largest concentration in the East. Today, these four groups are generally represented by communal political parties in the country's legislature.

Communalisation began in the British period when the colonial government imposed a classification of the Lankan society along ethno-religious and regional lines. Its character changed and its historical course became complex in the past hundred years or so as the originally imposed communal identities were modified and

at times challenged and reconstructed by the emerging dominant groups within each community. During this period, ethno-nationalism became both a cross-class unifier of particular ethnies and a bulwark against the development of an overarching secular corporate Lankan consciousness. The post-independence history of Lanka has been characterised by the communalisation of the Lankan State by the rise of the Sinhala Buddhist ideology to hegemonic stature, the further deepening of the communal divides, and, in more recent times, the militarisation of ethnic conflicts.

Furthermore, the various ethno-nationalist projects in Sri Lanka have, as elsewhere, served to justify and reinforce the subordination of women. The gender dimension of nationalist ideological projects has remained neglected for too long by analysts of ethnic conflicts. This is surprising as the construction of nationalist cultural identity has almost universally involved the justification and reinforcement of women's subordination. In their search for symbols and traditions to construct a cultural identity that served their interests, the dominant groups in ethno-nationalist movements tend to treat women as repositories of tradition. Experience in many parts of the world suggests that even where women are part of the armed struggle for national self-determination along with men, their role as bearers of traditional values may not change so significantly. Thus one of the features of

the conflicting communal identities in Lanka and elsewhere in South Asia is the conservation and reinforcement of patriarchal values.

After a brief conceptual note on communal identity formation, this paper proceeds to address the different phases of Muslim identity formation in Sri Lanka from the British period to the present.

Treating the Lankan Muslim identity question as a subject dynamically linked to the formation of Sinhala and Tamil communal identities, the paper also attempts to highlight the patriarchal underpinnings of specific and selected issues, in the formation of the Muslim communalist ideology and identity.

## **2. COMMUNAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN A MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY. A CONCEPTUAL NOTE**

A simple definition of a multi-ethnic society would be that it is a social formation with more than a single ethnic group sharing a common country. The vast majority of countries that exist today are multi-ethnic, a situation that has the potential for both ethnic conflicts and a harmonious pluralism. Unfortunately, the current dominant trend in many of the multi-ethnic countries in the so-called Third World - not to mention Eastern European countries like the former Yugoslavia - is one of ethnic conflicts which have become militarised. Communalisation has been the predominant tendency in these societies, rather than the evolution of a multi-ethnic national identity enveloping the different ethnic constituents.

Communalisation is a process of formation of an exclusivist collective identity across class-caste-gender divisions on the basis of language, and, or religion in a multi-ethnic society, with the intent of mobilising the people for political purposes under given historical conditions. It is engineered by ideologues who construct an identity of segregation with the aid of cultural symbols and myths in such a way as to conscientise people as members of a

community distinct from the others. Communal identities are characterised by varying degrees of hostility toward each other. They are not constants by variables, their changes being largely conditioned by changes in political economic conditions and the balance of political continuity. However, changing communal identities is not devoid of historical continuity. They are ideologically rooted in real and imagined histories, and history is often invoked to justify current ideological positions and shifts. An inevitable result of this is that history itself is written and re-written by the communalists to meet present ideological needs.

Communalism generated its own historiography as it cannot survive without mythologising and revising history. In Sri Lanka, an enduring myth which is based on a real historical event is the communalist interpretation of the war between Dutta Gamini and Elara as something akin to a 'national liberation war' to free the Sinhala Buddhists, the real owners of Lanka, from the clutches of an alien Tamil ruler. Even though this myth was exploded many years ago by eminent Lankan historians, it continues to thrive as folklore and popular history.

In most instances, the establishment of modern multi-ethnic states did not occur through any form of voluntary association of the constituent ethnics. The historical circumstances that brought multi-ethnic societies into being are diverse. For instance, in the

former colonies of Asia and Africa, new states were often created by conquering Western powers carving out 'national' territories according to their perceived administrative convenience and without any regard for pre-existing territorialities and their autonomy. Many of these countries turned into hotbeds of ethnic conflicts and nationalist separatist agitations in the post-colonial period. While avoiding a sweeping generalisation of the patterns of genesis of ethnic conflicts in these countries as it runs the risk of leaving out important specificities, we may identify some communalities that can be helpful in conceptualising the historical processes of communalisation:

- Colonial incorporation of different groups into a centralised state while at the same time adopting racial, linguistic, and religious divisions for reasons of political control and administration;
- Competition between the dominant elites of different communal groupings for colonial patronage and recognition and to legitimize their status as leaders of their respective communities;
- The dominant elites of each community seeking to construct a cross-class communal identity in such a way as to serve their own class interests;

- The emergence of new ethno-nationalist/communalist elites with popular support who challenge the old colonial elites within their communities;
- The rise of a particular, often majoritarian, ethno-nationalism leading to a progressive communalisation and desecularisation of the State which in turn reinforces the former, and of the reactive ethno-nationalism of the other groups;
- Selective dismantling or modification of structures which served the interests of the colonisers and their local allies, while glorifying and reinforcing patriarchal values and symbols;
- Resurrection of old and invention of new myths of origin and heroism to serve communal identity creation.

That the construction of collective identities takes cultural forms, and that the hallmark of the hegemonic ethno-nationalist ideology is the cementing it provides across classes should not obscure the importance of economic interests. The history of communalist politics in Sri Lanka has always had strong economic underpinnings. In a fundamental sense, communication is about economic opportunities and distribution but it shifts class issues to a terrain of ethno-nationalism and heritage, thereby displacing class with ethnicity at the ideological level. It is not our point that

nationalism and communalism can be reduced to class relations alone, but that the economic is one of the key variables in communal conflicts and that the ideological subsumption of class by communalism or nationalism should not be misconstrued as an elimination of the economic itself.

### **3. THE MAIN EVOLUTIONARY STAGES OF MUSLIM COMMUNALISATION**

In the British colonial period, the construction of communal identity took place within a framework in which the political parameters were set by the needs of state formation and administration in a non-settler colony.

The British had to create local structures of political governance through which they could exercise power over the whole island. Their approach to this challenge was one of innovatively combining British and local institutions. The British divided the society into communal or ethnic groups since they saw this as a feasible way to organise a system of government. In Sri Lanka, this naturally took the most evident form: Upcountry and Low country Sinhalese, Ceylon and Indian Tamils, Indian and Ceylon Moors and Malays. Thus communal divisions were imposed for political and administrative reasons.

The history of Muslim ethno-nationalism follows a trajectory building on the existing social formations and systems of governance which accommodated the local power structures through communal representation. In this process the

representation of the community was constructed by the elites as a top down ideological projection, which failed to address the internal social differentiation within the community.

The early phase of communal identity represented by the elites was of a passive and subservient form and not able to strike deep roots. However cultural revivalism as a form of resistance to colonialism leading to communalisation, actively promotes a cultural identity (like Sinhala Buddhism) which takes a more exclusivist form creating conflicts with other communities. In fact, the content and evolution of Muslim identity formation has to be understood in the context of the economic, political and social changes that underlie given moments of Lankan history. This paper attempts to examine critical components of this process through four distinct but overlapping phases mainly:

1. Arabisation of Moors and its Contradictions (1880s-1900)
2. Muslim Identity Formation in Reaction to Early Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism (1900-1920s)
3. Towards a Common Muslim Identity or a Misplaced Emphasis
4. The Rise of a Muslim Party

### 3.1. Arabisation of Moors and its Contradictions (1880s-1900)

In this phase the Colombo Muslim elites endeavoured to differentiate the Lankan Moors from the Lankan Tamils in ethnographic and racial terms. A major cause of this was the claim by Tamil (Colombo) elites as represented by Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan(2) that the Moors of Ceylon were Tamils who converted to Islam. Ramanathan articulated this view in his thesis on the "Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon" presented to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1888 [Journal-Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon) Vol. X]. This led to the historic Ramanathan-Azeez debate in which the latter argued that the Moors of Ceylon were of Arab origin and therefore racially distinct from the Tamils who claimed to originate from South India. At the root of this conflict was the question of communal political representation in the State Council which will be taken up below.

This period was marked by an emerging consciousness, and Muslims began to formulate central symbols of their identity aimed at reviving religio-cultural traditions. Muslim personal law, religious education and Arabic language became important facets to be nurtured and protected.

The very first piece of legislation was in the area of family law, to regulate Muslim marriages through the Mohammedan Marriage

Registration Ordinance [No 8 of 1886 and No 2 1888](3). This Ordinance was intended to keep a check on customary marriages and divorces - an indigenous practice which existed among the Muslim community. The need for this Ordinance was expedited as it was felt that lawful divorces could still exist even outside the ambit of the "Mohammedan Code" of 1806(4). The central concern of the colonial state was to formalise a customary practise thereby denying local agency to determine the affairs of its community. We also notice the beginning of a covert homogenising program on the part of Muslim elites intent on regulating 'tradition', primarily on the basis of religion(5).

During this period the tendency of Muslims to pursue religious education at the expense of their secular education has been highlighted (Azad, 1993). Arabic colleges/schools, initiated as a reaction to the proselytising tendencies in Christian schools, were already functioning. The Muslim Educational Society was founded in 1891 by Siddi Lebbe, who emphasised the need for modern Muslim education and female education {inspired by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and the Aligarh movement in India]. However the concept of seclusion of female education from the male was strictly maintained in the schools that were created for this purpose.

Inadequate facilities in Muslim schools and the presence of non-Muslim teachers in these schools acted as barriers, especially where the schools were for Muslim girls. Some of the schools had to be closed down due to internal conflicts and lack of sensitivity towards female education. In 1891 the literacy rate for Muslim men was 30.5 % as opposed to 1.5 % for Muslim women(6). The Administration Reports have also pointed out that the attendance of girls in the outstation schools was satisfactory (though relatively low in general) while in the Colombo region, "conspicuous by the absence of any formalised provision for education of girls of the Moorish community". This strongly contrasted with the "... energy displayed by the Malay(7) community for the education of girls..." (Administration Report 1892 - D14/Part IV).

The lack of access to education deprived the vast majority of Muslim women of a major opportunity for awareness development and social mobility. The Malay community favoured a more liberal attitude towards female education, thus providing for greater mobility in interaction and in securing employment, i.e. visibility in the public sphere.

Arabic was emphasised in the Muslim schools and study of the Koran was made compulsory. The importance of Arabic language denotes a preoccupation with the Arab heartland and concentration

of Muslim civilisation around the Arab world and less concerned with the Island's cultural history interwoven with the Indian Sub-continent. Also, there emerged an interest and attention to Arab greatness through Orabi Pasha's presence as a revered personality with the community(8). His social interaction with the outside world was through the community elites. Even the mode of dress acquired a new meaning with wealthy Muslims wearing the (Turkish) fez cap. All these point to the ideological underpinnings of a homogenisation of culture taking roots through such manifestations, while subsuming the variety of local histories in the Muslim ethno-social formations.

However the homogenising role of religion among Lankan Muslims was checked by the intervention of a racial myth when 'Ceylon Moors' claimed a status superior to that of Indian or Coast Moors and Malays. The Ceylon Moors felt a sense of racial superiority as 'indigenous Muslims' and always maintained this distinction very carefully, despite the common religious ties. This differentiation was maintained even officially, as the 1911 Census classifies Ceylon Moors and Indian Moors separately - a colonial distinction accepted and encouraged by the Muslim elite. This led to institutionalisation of intra-communal perceptions and was fundamental to the emergence of ethno-nationalist sub-categories

as well, which later on provided the basis for competitive representational politics.

The arguments put forward could be further illustrated through the significant political factor during this phase which became a founding moment of "Moor" political identity, beginning with P. Ramanathan's thesis presented before the Royal Asiatic Society in 1888. Although evidence shows that there was a tradition that the Muslim ancestors came from South India and also a tradition that they originated from Arab migrants, it was the Arab tradition that took political meaning and importance in the context of the time (Samaraweera, 1979).

Muslim counter arguments (of which the most vocal has been I.L.M. Abdul Azeez)(9) have been put forward and pointed out that:

- it cannot be denied that culturally there were similarities between Tamils and Muslims, due to the acculturation process;
- the use of Tamil language was for trade and interaction;
- physical resemblance to South Indian Tamils was strongly resented and Arab semblance emphasised (MICH, Colombo, 1957).

However, the proponents also claimed that there would have been a mixture of Arab and Tamil blood since very few Arabs brought their wives along. The original Arab descent was nevertheless upheld by the Muslim elites, which clearly denotes the patriarchal underpinning of ethnicity and the exclusiveness of this ideology to keep out the women as well as the Indian Moors (Ismail, 1995). By referring to Arab roots and ancestry from the Hashemites clan (descendants of Prophet Muhammed) Abdul Azeez in fact glorifies "Moorish blood" and racial purity, in similar vein as his elite counterparts from the Sinhala and Tamil communities(10).

The contention of the Muslim elite was that Ramanathan's prime motive in drawing parallels with Tamil ancestry was to keep Muslim representation out of the Legislative Council. Created in 1833, the Legislative Council was a vehicle for unelected communal representation (nominated by the Governor). Originally there was no separate seat for the Muslims as this was satisfied by the Tamil member. Subsequently there was agitation for a restructuring of the Legislative Council on account of the predominance of the Sinhala Christians of the Govigama caste(11) by the Sinhala Buddhist revivalists. In 1889, when it was restructured, the Muslims and the Kandyan Sinhalese benefitted.

M.C. Abdul Rahman (an elite merchant who remained loyal to the British) was nominated as the first Mohammedan member. The Ceylon Moors were thus considered a distinct race for purposes of colonial administration while defining out the Indian Moors.

The other issue of historic significance was the much publicised Fez issue of 1905, when the leadership was able to mobilise Muslim opinion on this question through public assertion. In this instance the Chief Justice forbade the Muslim Advocate from Batticaloa, M.C. Abdul Cader, from appearing before the High Court wearing his fez when he rose to address the court. It is interesting to note that the Chief Justice had this to say: "In this case you have adopted an European dress and have your shoes on. One end of your body must be bare" (Ceylon Daily News, 23.04.1969). Petitions were filed against this, and the final verdict of the Supreme Court ruled that wearing of the fez was prohibited in court.

The community leaders protested and organised a mass meeting at the Maradana Mosque grounds and even a Fez Committee (comprising members of the Legislative Council and prominent businessmen) was formed for this purpose. A lengthy memorandum was addressed to the Queen pointing out the unjust ruling to Muslim lawyers, whereas in other British colonies (India

and Egypt) wearing the fez with European dress was allowed. The chief speaker to this meeting was invited from India, a Muslim lawyer (who was also a Moulavi), who claimed that he had worn the fez in the presence of the King and the Queen. It has been reported that over 30,000 Muslims voted for the memorandum and the result was that the judgement was reversed allowing the fez to be worn in court.

The consequent of all this was religious issues/factors became an established pattern in the Muslim ethnic formation with symbols of religious and ethno-identity drawn from the Arab world, beginning to be formulated by the leadership. Preservation of elite interests through assertion of an exclusivist community ideology becomes predominant and this takes place without any resistance. As we shall see in the subsequent sections, the boundaries and limits of this identity formation though historically produced are in constant process of transformation, its configurations being directly related to the other more comprehensive configurations of ethno-nationalisms and that of the State.

### 3.2. Muslim Identity Formation in Reaction to Early Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism (1900-1920s)

Muslims were the target of attack by early Sinhala Buddhist revivalists, and the anti-Muslim propaganda culminated in the riots of 1915 in which Indian Moors were the victims. A major causal factor in this conflict was the resentment of the Sinhala nationalist petty bourgeoisie against trading interests of the Moors. In this phase Muslim identity consciousness became highly conditioned by the rising majoritarian Sinhala Buddhism and its intolerance towards the non-Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka communal identities as represented by the colonial elites in the 19th century were rather articulated and in ways that did not question the authority of the State. Devoid of any elements of anti-colonialism, they merely served to confirm the basic divisions adopted by the British. However, the situation changes as we approach the turn of the century when Sinhala Buddhist cultural revivalism emerged both as a form of resistance to colonialism and as a way of asserting an exclusivist ethnic identity. Anagarika Dharmapala was perhaps the first person to use the term Sinhala Buddhist in a racial-religious sense(12). The notion of a Sinhala Buddhist nation emerged in the early 20th century in the British colonial period, and in the decades that followed it went through an

evolutionary transformation into a mass consciousness, overarching local, regional and caste identities.

Dharmapala and other Sinhala Buddhists like Ratnaweera (editor of the 'Aryan') propagated the myth that the Sinhalese were of Aryan origin and therefore racially superior to the non-Aryan Tamils and Muslims who inhabited the island. The ideology of Sinhala Buddhist revivalism was predominantly cultural, with mild political overtones directed on marginal issues like consumption of alcohol and privileges of Christians under the colonial rule (Jayawardena, 1985). Dharmapala stood for limited autonomy within the British empire with Sinhala Buddhists in key administrative positions. It would seem that the belief in the Aryan origins of the 'Sinhala race' made the Buddhist revivalists feel some sort of affinity for the ruling British. "It is a consolation to see", remarked Ratnaweera, "that we are governed by an Aryan nation"(13). Anagarika once declared: "True that I criticise in my articles the officials; but my loyalty to the British Throne is as solid as a rock and I have invariably expressed sentiments of loyalty to the King..." (Guruge A., 1965:LIX). It is no wonder, therefore, as Gunawardene (1985) notes, "that such an ideology did not produce an anti-imperialist movement of mass proportions".

Sinhala Buddhist cultural nationalism thus displayed a dual political character - it was more compromising towards British colonialism while displaying a growing intolerance towards the Lankan minorities. Anagarika Dharmapala stated in 1922: "Look at the Administration Report of the General Manager of Railways... Tamils, Cochins and Hambankarayas are employed in large numbers to the prejudice of the people of the island - sons of the soil, who contribute the largest share" (Guruge A., 1965:515).

Certain elements of Buddhist revivalism served the growth of anti-minority sentiments. The Moors became one of the first targets of Sinhala Buddhist intolerance. Dharmapala portrayed Muslim traders as unethical exploiters of Sinhala Buddhists. The presence of butchers' shops, which were mostly owned and run by Muslims, and of mosques in sacred Buddhist cities like Anuradhapura was regarded by the revivalists as an affront to Buddhism and Sinhala Buddhist culture. This kind of hostility was also extended towards the Christian churches. The Temperance movement and opposition to butchers' shops, churches, and mosques around cities like Anuradhapura were driven by strong anti-minority sentiments. The following quoted from Dharmapala's letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1915 epitomises this: "... What the German is to the Britisher that the Muhammedan is to the Sinhalese. He is an alien to the Sinhalese by religion, race and language. He traces his

origin to Arabian, whilst the Sinhalese traces his origin to India and Aryan sources" (Guruge, 1965:540). In the period prior to 1915 these campaigns were so actively pursued that Governor Chalmers, explaining the animosity of the Sinhala peasantry towards Muslim traders, stated that they had "always been viewed by the villager with feelings entertained at all times and in all lands towards transitory aliens who make money out of the local peasantry by supplying their wants at the shop..." (Jayawardena, 1985).

The single event which became a landmark in Lankan history with profound impact on communal relations in the country was the anti-Muslim riots of 1915. At this time, Sri Lanka was not a communalised society as we speak of today. The outbreak of violence in Kandy, which spread to Colombo and the North Western, Southern, Sabaragamuwa, and Central provinces was targetted at the Coast Moors(14); trading rivalry was the underlying and main cause of the immediate outbreak. According to Kearney, the riots and the way in which the British suppressed the violence led to a rise in anti-colonial feelings, and to the heightening of nationalist sentiments among the Sinhala Buddhists (Ceylon Studies Seminar, 1969/70).

Some historians have traced the background of the riots as flowing from the inflammatory statements against the Moors published in the Sinhala newspapers, especially the 'Sinhala Buddhaya' and the 'Sinhala Jathiya' which stirred Sinhala nationalist feelings. There is also evidence to support the connection between the Temperance movement(15) and the growth of nationalism. The leaders who were arrested during the riots were those who had been active in the Temperance movement (Jayawardena, 1972; Azad, 1993).

It was Ponnambalam Ramanathan, the 'educated Ceylonese' member of the Legislative Council, who championed the cause of Sinhala Buddhists; criticising the colonial government for its treatment of the Sinhalese especially drawing attention to the Riots Damages Ordinance (though never published) which made provisions for the Sinhalese in specified areas (whether implicated in the riots or not) to indemnify all losses suffered by Muslims. He demanded a Royal Commission to inquire into the riots and the excesses committed by the British force on the Sinhala people.

In Colombo, rumour mongering was typical of these times with the obvious cries that Sinhalese were being massacred, bodies being suspended and that their women were being raped. The Muslims decided to defend themselves if attacked, and a decision was taken at the Mosque congregation that they would fight to the last, "...

but if the tide turned against them, the women, rather than be ravished, should jump into the wells and commit suicide, leaving only the children..." (Thawfeeq, 1986). From time immemorial, history has documented that women's bodies have been subjected to humiliation and attack in times of war and violence, so as to revenge the hostile party in a manner that would taint the honour and purity of their women. Muslim male thinking at this time was quick to decide that the best course of action for their women should be, not in the forefront of the struggle, but preservation of their honour and chastity even if it meant ending their lives! Protection in this sense implied exertion of male authority to which women had to submit.

It is worth noting that the Malay community was not attacked, nor the Borah shops and stores (Azad, 1993). The riots did not evoke strong emotional reaction among the Muslims in the North or the East or the North-West. Jayawardena (1972) has observed that labour unrest and political tensions contributed to the rioting in Colombo and concluded that it also had impulses other than religious tension.

The Ceylon Moor community panicked, and this marked the beginning of an awakening political consciousness that was to shape the course of events that followed. The Muslim elites had

their own interests in mind, as evident from the following remarks by W.M. Abdul Rahman, the unofficial member in the Legislative Council for Governor Chalmers, in a report on the riot areas: "... for the insult hurled at Islam some visible and abiding mark must be put upon Buddhist temples, if for no other reason, at least to preserve the prestige of the British Raj." (Blackton, 1970). The immediate response was for the Muslim leadership to strengthen their collaboration with the British.

The Sinhala parties were being defended by the well known Tamil leader who clearly showed an antipathy towards the Muslims. From a Muslim view point it appeared as though there was an alliance between the Sinhala and Tamil elites. So much so that the same alliance of Tamil-Sinhala elites founded the Ceylon National Congress in 1917(16), the fears of the Muslims increased as memories of 1915 were still very strong and the Muslim leadership kept out of it. However the Sinhala-Tamil alliance was resting on fragile ground, as revealed by the subsequent events which related to seats in the Legislative Council and other aspects of political patronage from the colonial government.

In the foregoing section we have seen that collective action - in this case by the Sinhala Buddhists through their communal ideology, was an attempt to create "legitimate space" in the public domain,

while questioning the legitimacy of that very space which was occupied by the Coast Moors. They were at the same time expressing their protest against the colonial regime. The Temperance movement and Sinhala Buddhist revivalism have also demonstrated that movements outside the democratic process seek to expand their control over public life playing an instrumentalist role, drawing symbolic boundaries in which identities are being constructed and contested. In such a political configuration, the Muslims were deeply affected; forced to re-assess their role as a minority and grapple with the new facts of representational politics where the dialectics of their identity vis a vis the Indian Moors and the Malays had to be redrawn. Based on our understanding that contending notions of collective identity exist, and any one of these may become dominant over the other at a given point of time (Hassan, 1994), the fluidity of Muslim identity - its definition and redefinition - was essentially a function of the political and social circumstances.

### 3.3. Towards a Common Muslim Identity or a Misplaced Emphasis

Since the advent of universal franchise in 1931 and the politics of communal representation acquires a mass character, the upcountry - low country distinction within the Sinhalese becomes weaker.

The Muslims on the other hand sought a unity between Moors,

Malays and Indian Muslims. Yet the distinction between the Southern and North-Eastern Muslims remains, with the latter not enjoying any significant role in Muslim politics.

In this phase there was a tendency towards consolidating a community polity, the seeds of which had already been sown. Although seen as externally antagonistic, the ethno-nationalist ideologies were meant to be an internally homogenising project /process with the intention of narrowing down the diversities within the demarcated social boundaries.

Constitutional changes, elite competition and communal politics

Muslim communalisation was initially loose and meant to serve the Colombo and Southern business elites. It did not grow of a mobilisation based on popular demands or real/imagined grievances of the larger sections of the population. But with time due to the deepening of the communalisation of society it was transformed into an ideology in a changed political context.

Further, the colonial administrative structures allowed the elites to sustain their positions of power and control in a mutually reinforcing fashion. For instance the voting criteria [1921-1924] laid down that only adult males over 21 years, literate [English,

Tamil or Sinhala] and in addition satisfied any one of the three economic criteria were eligible to vote, i.e.:

- a clear annual income of not less than Rs. 600/=;
- immovable property in one's own right or in one's wife's name (value not less than 1500/=);
- occupant as owner or tenant of houses valued at Rs.400/= or Rs.200/= according to urban or rural situations (Roberts, 1979).

Under such conditions, not only did the voter's class, status and sex matter, but also his social marital status which aggregated wife's property as husband's eligibility to vote(17). Further, western education was one of the determinants of elite status, and elite families did not hesitate to consolidate through marriage their economic status, and accumulate capital and property, thus ensuring upward social mobility.

The Manning reforms of 1920 exploited existing or potential communal disharmony through their collaboration with minority elites. Communal electorates were brought about in order to adjust the balance in favour of minorities. For the first time, the Malays began to demand or thought it was opportune to claim a seat in the Legislative Council. Their greatest concern was that their "ethnicity and identity was being overshadowed by the numerically

"superior Moors", who were trying to exploit them on the basis of a common religious identity. The Malays decided to form the first political association, following a mass meeting in Colombo in 1921, to agitate for a Malay seat in the Legislative Council (Hussainmiya, 1987).

All these events led to the emergence of the idea of Muslims as a minority to be distinguished from the Tamils. However, the Malay-Moor division(18) persisted through the kind of stereotyping projected that the Moors were engaged in trade and commercial ventures and that the Malays were in government services such as the police and clerical services. The Moor-Malay dichotomy was further hardened by the belief among the Moors that they were of Arab origin, and the Malays of Javanese origin. The Malays ardently defined their identity in terms of an Eastern civilisation rather than inheritors of a Muslim civilisation who claimed to be 'descendants of Arabs'.

Perhaps it is important to note that the Malays and Moors, though professing the same religion, existed as two separate entities whose elites' interests overlapped at times for common political purposes. Malay elites like T.B. Jayah(19) sometimes spoke in terms of a unifying Muslim(20) community primarily on the issue of representation.

Interestingly, though the two group leaders (Malays and Moors) had differed before, the coalition, i.e. formation of the Ceylon Muslim League in 1924 with a significant Indian Moor segment, was for collective agitation. This was in respect of increased representation; responsible self-rule; safeguarding the cultural, social, and economic interests of the Muslims; and, lastly, to promote inter-communal amity.

In spite of the hive of activity that was being pursued at the political administrative level, the disparities at the local level remained unaddressed. On the eve of the Donoughmore Commission (1927), the differences between the leadership in Colombo and the Muslims in the regions (living outside the centre), became sharper due to conflicts between the older and younger generations, on the issues of power and control over community affairs. The territorial system of representation (as opposed to the previous system of communal representation) recommended by the Donoughmore reforms was opposed by the minorities as well as the elites for their own class reasons. It is not surprising that the Muslims in the Eastern Province, being territorially concentrated, supported the Donoughmore proposals (Azad, 1993) and expressed their disappointment with the Colombo based leadership whose preoccupation was with trading interests.

While the Muslim leadership was battling with its own set of contradictions, the Sinhala masses were being mobilised through the Sinhala Maha Sabha (SMS)(21). S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (Founder of the SMS), while accepting the pluralist nature of the Lanka polity, concentrated on uniting the Sinhalese and forging stronger cohesion within the community. In his speech in the State Council (March 1939) and address before the SMS (December 1939), his intended course of action was clear: "We (the SMS) saw differences amongst our own people - caste distinction, up-country and low-country distinctions, religious distinctions and various other distinctions - and we therefore felt that we should achieve unity, which is the goal of us all. Surely, the best method was to start from the lower rung: firstly, unity among the Sinhalese; and, secondly, whilst uniting the Sinhalese to work for higher unity of all communities..." (Roberts, 1979).

The Muslim leadership was thus forced into emulating and responding to the strong communal overtones of the time. Historical circumstances demanded not only forging alliances with the Sinhala/Tamil elites, but also maintaining the general idiom of legitimacy within the Muslim community. For this purpose, mobilising Muslim opinion in order to safeguard political interests, uniting all shades of factionalism within (Moors and Malays) and

taking a stand against the reforms proposed in 1937-38 was achieved through the Political Conference organised in 1939.

The events that shaped the course of history during the decade after the Donoughmore reforms further strained ethno-national relations, while the elites of the different communal groups consolidated their own political bases. The Language Bill [1944](22) marks a key event which set in motion a vociferous campaign by the elites of each community for maintaining their respective status quo.

J.R. Jayawardene in moving the Bill expressed the inherent fears of the Sinhalese, quite explicitly :

"... I had always the intention that Tamil should be spoken in Tamil speaking provinces, and that Tamil should be the official language in the Tamil speaking provinces. But as two-thirds of the people of this country speak Sinhala, I had the intention of proposing that only Sinhalese should be the official language of the Island; but it seems to me that the Tamil community and also the Muslim community, who speak Tamil, wish that Tamil should also be included on equal terms with Sinhalese. The great fear I had was that Sinhalese being a language spoken by only 3,000,000 people in the whole world would suffer, or may be entirely lost in time to

come, if Tamil is also placed on an equal footing with it in this country..." (State Council Debates, May 24, 1944).

Subsequently, when J.R. Jayawardene wanted Tamil also included, the motion was vehemently opposed by Sinhala members in the Council with arguments that the fundamental condition for national unity was the existence of 'a national language' and not two languages. Accordingly it was expected that the Muslims and the Tamils would integrate into the mainstream Sinhala ideological thinking. The Tamil members were of the view that national unity or national cohesion cannot be imposed by suppressing one of the languages spoken by at least 2,000,000 people.

It is interesting to highlight that the colonial state was instrumental in reinforcing the fears of the Sinhalese and perpetuating the communal stereotyping of the times. Evidence from the Soulbury Commission's report [1945] on constitutional reforms referred to:

"... Edward Stubbs, Governor of Ceylon 1933-37, my predecessors and myself have always recognised that, for good government of the country, the brains and industry of the Tamils were as useful in the past as they would be invaluable in the future. We shall always require their assistance..."

As for the Moors, "... they had secured a virtual monopoly of the export and import trade [...] through a considerable number as many as one third are occupied as cultivators in the Eastern Province [...] they are thrifty and industrious people [...] for various reasons neglected their secular education and have not in that respect kept abreast of other communities [...] efforts are being made to remedy the errors of past years..." (Soulbury report, 1945).

On the eve of independence, the Muslim leadership had politically and economically integrated into the Sinhalese dominated polity, in spite of displaying resistance to total domination by the Sinhalese. We see two trends within the Muslim elites: one that strongly advocated a Muslim bloc overarching the Malay-Moor division and strengthening communal representation, and the other, more nationalist, in fact serving the Sinhala nationalist cause. The traditional Tamil leadership was confronted with the emerging Tamil leadership the Tamil Congress. The Tamil Congress spokespersons were to steer the community's destiny over the coming years. Their specific concern was the rising Sinhala Buddhist cultural revival and its impact.

The contours of Muslim consciousness and evolution of "a Muslim identity" traced through the various historical epochs have been largely determined by the hegemonic control by the leadership

purported to be inclusive of all classes. In trying to understand the interactive, shifting and selective nature of such a formation, elite competition not only intra-community but also inter-community were critical determinants. For the Muslim leadership, the preservation of a religio-ethnic identity has been a 'bargaining process' in terms of: what aspects to give up; what aspects to modify; what aspects to project, over given historical moments. The sense of the past has provided justification for the present and precedents for the future, by providing legitimacy to existing structures of authority even if it had been invented (mare, 1993). Consequently the boundaries of "Muslim ethno-nationalism" were defined through political moves which intended to balance the primordial sentiments/attachments of the community (for support from within) with the instrumentalist ideology of the leadership (Brass, 1991).

### **The Franchise Issue, Converging Constructions and Competing Interests**

The issue of universal franchise attracted the attention of the Donoughmore Commission, who had felt the need for a widening of power to the larger masses. This was a critical departure from

the reforms of 1923-24 where only 4 % of the population had the right to vote (Donoughmore Report, 1928; De Silva, 1981).

The recommendation was that all males over 21 and females over 30 years should be eligible to vote, but when it came to implementation in 1931, the colonial office decided to make the age limit equal for both men and women. Sri Lanka thus entered a historic epoch as the first British Colony in Asia and the first Asian country to advance political emancipation through the right to vote to all citizens (De Silva, 1981). However, there was agitation and protest against the extension of the franchise to females and to those of Indian origin. The question of suffrage and its relevance to women's democratic rights was not raised by any group that gave evidence before the Commission as a matter of political right, but only a concession at a more parochial level.

Goonesinghe(23) and some radicals (within the Ceylon National Congress) had continuously urged the Congress to take up the issue of adult "manhood suffrage" which was not a matter of priority for the Congress campaigners. When the Congress leaders had to give oral evidence before the Donoughmore Commission, their stand on the franchise was that it should be restricted to those with an income of at least Rs. 50/- per month. Their contention was that if this income ceiling was further reduced, then "there was the

danger that they may get a class of person who could not use the vote with any sense of responsibility and whose votes might be at the disposal of the highest bidder" (De Silva, 1981). On extending voting rights to women, they recommended that the age limit should be 25 years with "a rigid literacy test of a property qualification"(24).

The other most disturbing issue for the Sinhala leadership was the granting of the franchise to the Indian immigrant plantation workers on equal terms. The immediate threat to the interests of the Sinhala population in the plantation areas was raised. The Kandyans were especially alarmed at the possibility of Indian domination of the highlands, if permanent citizenship rights were conferred to the Indian indigenous population. On the single issue of Indian enfranchisement, the CNC and Kandyan leaders came together, although the Kandyans did not support the demand for self government(25). The motives of the CNC were certainly aimed at preserving the sectional interests of the capitalists and landowners. Goonesinghe however supported the principle of adult suffrage, on account of his activism in the trade union movement.

The minorities were bitterly hostile to the Donoughmore Report because of its condemnation of communal electorates. Elites representing minorities found that the safeguards to protect their

interests had been inadequate. On behalf of the Tamils, P. Ramanathan came out strongly against universal suffrage (similar to the Sinhala leadership), but his main plank of opposition was that it would result in the permanent domination of the polity by the Sinhalese. T.B. Jayah became the protagonist of the Muslims and a memorandum on 'Muslims and Proposed Constitutional Changes in Ceylon' was addressed to the Colonial Office.

Ramanathan's class, caste and patriarchal values pervaded his statements on the voting right. He and his conservative colleagues believed that giving the vote to the non-Vellala castes(26) and to women was not only a grave mistake, leading to "mob rule" but, according to Ramanathan, "an anathema to the Hindu way of life" (P. Ramanathan, Memorandum on the Donoughmore Constitution, 1934, quoted by Russel, 1982).

Sandrasegera's(27) advice to the Jaffna male voters in 1930 was equally reprimanding: "I would advise the people of Jaffna to see that during the next election they did not take their women to the polls. I would ask them not even to register women as electors. They should ask their women to mind their business in their own homes" (Russel, 1982:87).

The Muslim elites echoed in similar vein on the franchise issue, that is would be a setback to their own political destiny. However,

the Malay and Moor leadership was divided: the Malays favoured the franchise while the Moors expressed discontent, invoking 'custom and tradition' to prevent extension of franchise to women. Wickremasinghe, in her book 'Ethnic Politics in Sri Lanka' (1995), documents "... it is the duty of men not to allow women to plunge into unavoidable anxieties" and questions the praiseworthiness of femininity as an asset. Thus women's role as citizens tends to be circumscribed by notions of culturalism, and always subject to the customary definitions governing women's conduct. The instances highlighted below give some insights into this.

In the General Elections held in 1931, Macan Markar (Galle bred Gem Merchant, settled in Colombo) was elected to the State Council as Member for Batticaloa where the Muslim community predominated. This was the first occasion when Muslim women went to cast their votes, and Macan Markar took great pains to convince the Muslim women that they could go out and cast their votes, by getting Alims(28) from Colombo and Galle to issue a "religious ruling" to that effect (Thawfeeq, 1986). A phenomenon that is to be interpreted as legitimising women's secluded status and, at the same time, manipulating the female voter constituency(29) to exercise a "hitherto guarded right" which was exclusively male conditioned space.

It was documented by Thawfeeq that in the 1942 be-elections for Colombo Central, Muslim women came out of "their secluded purdah", wealthy Muslims supporting their candidates by providing "heavily curtained cars, so that they (the women) may observe their cherished purdah while coming to the polling station" (Thowfeeq, 1986). Norms of seclusion and honour are closely bound up with the status of the family in both an economic and social sense. The urban values and norms of seclusion were reinforced in this instance, through a subtle subversion so as to allow women to move into the political-public space.

A very important development in the agitation for universal franchise from women came with the formation of the Women's Franchise Union (WFU) in 1927, spearheaded by Agnes de Silva (Jayawardena, 1986). The WFU(30) was in the forefront demanding voting rights for women and their evidence before the Donoughmore Commission stands out in remarkable contrast (vis a vis the other groups that gave evidence) for its commitment to equal rights across class and ethnicity.

"We went in the spirit of crusaders and answered the questions in an inspired manner. Lord Donoughmore asked if we wanted Indian Tamil labourers on the estates to have the vote. I replied 'Certainly, they are women too. We want all women to have the vote'. Agnes

de Silva, leader of the women's deputation to the Commission on Constitutional Reform, 1927" (Russel, 1981:58, quoted by Jayawardena, 1986).

The WFU clearly wanted a place in the established power structure, and they also represented a protest against the socio-political structures which excluded women's access to the seats of power.

The other vexed question - the status of the Indian Tamils and citizenship rights - had been a highly controversial one. Both the Sinhala and Tamil spokespersons have used the Indian Tamils as tools to gain political leverage. On the one hand, Bandaranaike used the Indian Tamils as a scapegoat to whip up Sinhala communalism; whilst Ponnambalam used the actions and statements of the Sinhalese leaders towards the Indian Tamils as evidence of Sinhala chauvinism. The problem of franchise for the Indians was therefore left unresolved.

In 1948, the Citizenship Act, the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 and the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act disenfranchised Indian residents of their citizenship rights. The background to the legislation was the deep sense of apprehension in the minds of the Sinhalese especially the Kandyans, of Indian domination of the highlands. The other fear

amongst the Sinhalese was that Indian Tamils would add to the political strength of the Ceylon Tamils. Furthermore, the new Government was particularly concerned of the threat from the leftists and the trade unionists who were trying to win over the plantation workers from the Ceylon Indian which controlled them.

When the Bill came to be debated in Parliament Senator Razik Fareed had his own interests for supporting it.

"We the Ceylon Moors have suffered most in the past from want of a citizen bill. We [...] have been treated badly by other people under the guise of Muslim brotherhood. We have very unfortunately played ourselves into the hands of other people..."  
(Hansard, vol. ii, Sept. 1948, p 2718).

His emphasis on a nationalist tone later on was intended to appease the ruling Sinhalese elites and also we note an implicit attack on the Indian Muslims:

"The Ceylon Moors had a flourishing trade in Man street Pettah, barely forty years ago, but today you find the whole of the trade in the Pettah, even the property which the Moors owned in the Pettah, in the hands of non Ceylon Traders" (Hansard, vol. ii, Nov. 1948, p 1171).

As for the Muslim community, the disenfranchisement of the Indian Muslims significantly affected their electoral strength. The 1947 Delimitation Commission had found that in assessing the Muslim strength, the Indian Moors should be included under the category 'Muslims'. For instance, in demarcating Colombo Central, the Commission stated:

"... Without the Indian Moors the percentage of the Muslims is 23.6. It would not be too much to rely on the probability that there were would be added to this strength at least 1.5 out of the 7.4 percent of Indian Moors, and in this way the Muslim strength would reach the percentage of at least 25.1 necessary to secure a seat. We are however inclined to the view that the religious tie is stronger than the racial tie and that it is proper in assessing the Muslim strength to include Indian Moors under the category of Muslims, and on this basis the Muslim strength is 31.8 percent..."  
(Sessional Papers XIII, 1946 Report of the Delimitation Commission).

But the problem confronted was lack of documentary proof in the case of the Indian Moors as regards registration of births. Registration was made compulsory only after 1897, and that too was not perfect. Proof of citizenship was subject to production of the birth certificates of either the father and grandfather, or

grandfather and great-grandfather, the paternal line being institutionalised as proof of birth. Such proof was required whenever the Indian Moor sought government employment, import licenses, trade permits, registration for voting, passports, etc. It was regretted later that the Muslim leadership had supported the Citizenship Act without considering the problems of the Indian Moor population and, more important, the political implications for electoral representation (Rizwie, 1970).

The disenfranchisement legislation served to further distort the electoral balance in favour of the Sinhalese. As a result, the Sinhala voter became the decisive and instrumental force in the country's politics. Sinhalese over-representation enabled governments to enact legislation obtaining the two-third majority for constitutional changes, thus satisfying the demands of the Sinhala constituency. The United National Party (UNP)(31) was thus placed in an advantageous position in the elections that followed.

#### Post-colonial phase and intensified ethnic relations

In the post-independence period, Tamil political parties in the North-East sought to incorporate Muslims as Tamil speaking people. Tamil-Muslim relations in the North and East remained harmonious, with cultural commonalities being naturally accepted

by both communities. However, the resurgence of Sinhala Buddhism and its institutionalisation became central elements in the struggle for a democratic multi-ethnic polity. In fact, the very idiom of democratic politics has become communalised and has reproduced reinforcing communal ideologies.

The lack of a vibrant political culture that could relate to the problems and aspirations of the people and help to forge a multi-ethnic polity has been highlighted by many political analysts. We may quote from an earlier work by one of us:

"We may be justified in blaming the British for starting the dirty business of communal politics, but we cannot go on fooling ourselves by blaming them for its continuation and metamorphosis into militant and barbaric ethno-nationalist forms in the post-independence period. Communalisation transforms a multi-ethnic society into a hotbed of competing communal identities whose ideological consolidation relies on targeting the "other" as the "real enemy". As this leads to an unequal distribution of power between the different communal blocs, there is the real danger of those with power victimising the powerless. The Lankan society has become an extreme case of a vicious circle of communalisation and imagined enemies, beginning with the majority Sinhala Buddhists and inevitably engulfing the Tamils and Muslims"

(Shanmugaratnam N., The Tamil Question in Sri Lanka. Some Reflections. Tamil Times, vol., 1993).

Ethno-nationalism is the ideology of communalism. Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian communalism was institutionalised through parliamentary and other legal means. The majority ethno-nationalist parties used the Westminster model and universal franchise to further the communalisation of Sinhala society as a short cut to parliamentary power. The disenfranchisement of the Indian upcountry Tamils in 1948 was the first major instance of using the parliamentary system to manipulate the electoral balance of forces in ethnic terms to enhance the relative strength of the Sinhala constituency.

The victory of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP)(32) in the 1956 parliamentary elections signified the resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist ethno-nationalism and its institutionalisation. The MEP was a cross class alliance cemented by an ideology of Sinhala Buddhism and populist social welfarism.

In 1956, Sinhala only was declared the official language of Sri Lanka by a majority vote in parliament. In 1957 a separate Ministry for Buddha Sasana was established. Communalisation became intensified and 1956 signified the beginning of the desecularisation of the Sri Lankan State, with the revival of

Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the elevation of Sinhala Buddhism to the status of a state religion. This period also marks the rise of Sinhala Buddhism as the hegemonic ideology and the reactive nationalism of the Tamils of the North and East. Here we see a shift in the key actors with the constituency taking over the elites.

The institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhism takes new forms which is different to the SLFP led Bandaranaike era, when the SLFP in opposition to the UNP takes on a Sinhala nationalist line, but at the same time anticipating minority support as well. In this phase, religion, culture and language emerge as central issues, in addition to land settlement and education.

The emergence of Dr Badiuddin Mahmud as Muslim leader marks a new trend in the Muslim political scene. Mahmud (supporter of the SLFP) becomes the spokesperson for the Muslims, a man who is not from the South but who reflects some of the reformist characteristics of the SLFP and the MEP. The dual character of the SLFP is worth noting here: on the one hand was the Sinhala Buddhist ideology, and on the other democratic reformism of a limited nature, for example in the field of social welfare, non alignment in international relations and sympathy towards national freedom struggles.

B. Mahmud also represents a shift from the Muslim business elites towards a more majority oriented leadership, a leader to whom the Eastern Muslims could relate to. In the late 1960's he formed the Islamic Socialist Front (with a rural base) which indicated his sensitivity to two main trends of contemporary thinking among the youth and young Muslim intellectuals. This was a response to the widespread discontent among them with the traditional Muslim leadership from the South which had exploited the community for commercial concessions and special privileges (Ceylon Daily News, 09.02.1967).

The issues that affected Muslim communal sentiments were land policy and land settlement, especially in the Eastern province. Colonisation schemes that were developed in the area were largely for the benefit of the Sinhalese constituency. Available records showed that there had been a progressive increase in the Sinhala voter population from 1947 to 1980, with a climax being reached in the 1960's and also an increase in the land area occupied by Sinhalese compared to Tamils and Muslims. This was the result of State aided illegal settlements in addition to the Government Settlement Schemes under the Gal Oya Development Project 1960-63 ('Problems of Muslims in the Amparai district'. All Ceylon Muslim League files, 1984). Takeover of lands used by Muslims had proceeded in stages from the 1960's for about two decades.

The total extent of land taken over had been estimated up to 14,000 cadres (Hoole, 1993).

As regards education, the standardisation policy of the government in 1970-73(33), which introduced subject wise and media wise standardisation for admission to Universities aroused great controversy. In 1975 and 1976 came the district quota scheme where admission to Universities varied according to the district population. The Tamils were affected most adversely by this scheme while the Sinhalese benefitted, and the admission of the Muslims into Universities increased. The Government however was compelled to recognise that the University admission system had become a political liability and led to an aggravation of the ethnic conflict.

Tamil communalisation(34) sharpens with the problems thrown up as a result of the Official Language policy of the Government (Swabasha-Sinhala Only Act, 1956). At the time the bill was presented in Parliament, Razik Fareed and other Muslim representatives voted for the bill, but the Federal Party member M. Mustapha(35) voted against. It is obvious that the Muslims in the East had more in common with their Tamil counterparts.

The plantation Tamils however were marginalised, suffering from the disenfranchisement which was partially reverted with the

Sirima-Shastri Pact in 1964(36). Tamil ethno-nationalism grows to be more and more exclusive turning very hostile towards the Muslims as it takes militant forms. New symbols are added and stated in Dravidian terms excluding the Muslims and gradually identifying them as a rival group, i.e. a redefinition of Tamil ideology in pure militant terms.

Against such a backdrop, Muslims began to feel their vulnerability as a minority. On the one hand was the State consciously promoting the Sinhala ideology of majoritarian communalism, and on the other the additional problem of majoritarian communalism of the Tamils in the North and East. In the early phase it was noted that Tamil-Muslim relations were never antagonistic, but in the post-1972 period the relations became more strained, sharpened and communalised.

#### 4. The rise of a Muslim party

With communalisation of the Sri Lanka polity reaching a peak, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) emerges as a logical phenomena in a country where parliamentary politics is run by communal parties.

In this phase the issues that are highlighted are more from an Eastern Muslim point of view, the centre stage of politics being shifted to the North and East. Issues relating to the social, economic and political structures are being articulated more concretely. Tamil-Muslim relations are affected with the intensification of the ethnic conflicts and increasing militarisation. The tragedy of multi-ethnicism in Lankan communalisation has only led to mutual reinforcement of age old reactionary and patriarchal values, strengthened the forces of religious intolerance, class disunity and disintegration, and negation of the possibilities for constructing a Lankan identity.

The Muslims (with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress as spokesperson) begin their own redefinition with recourse to a religious identity and reconceptualisation in their search for a pure and exclusivist ideology. The SLMC has arrogated to itself the role of propagating Islamic values to the community (and to the country at large), whilst accepting the sovereignty of the Holy Quran. The

SLMC had also promised to institute 'Islamic rule' if elected to power (Ceylon Daly News, 26.04.88; Personal Interviews, 1995).

The birth of the SLMC in the 1980's and its phenomenal rise in the past decade signified several things. Firstly, it meant a shift in leadership and the centre of Muslim politics from Colombo and the South to the predominantly Muslim rural East. This implied a dramatic alteration in the balance of political forces within the Muslim community. Secondly, the SLMC represented the arrival of a distinct Muslim political party in a polity in which all the major political parties have been communally based in the past four decades. Thirdly, and in our view most crucial, the SLMC is the Muslim reaction to Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil communalisms, and the expression of a collective religious identity which has been reconstituted so as to counter the threat of militant Tamil chauvinism in the North and East.

The birth and rise of the SLMC as a party of the Lankan Muslims based in the North and East which is largely Tamil speaking could be explained by:

- the growing gap between the Southern Muslim political elite and the Muslims of the East and the North in terms of political and economic interests. The Southern Muslim political elites had traditionally represented the interests of the Muslim business

classes, whereas the Muslim in the East and North are largely farmers and fishermen;

- like their Tamil counterparts, Muslims in the North and East faced problems due to State aided colonisation and discrimination on the grounds of language. State aided Sinhala colonisation was perceived by the Muslims as a project undermining their future interests as it took away State land in their areas for alienation to Sinhalese from outside. There was also the growing fear among the Muslims in the East that Sinhala colonisation was reducing their electoral clout as Muslims. Their mother tongue is Tamil and the vast majority of them did not speak Sinhala (until very recently). These issues were not regarded as serious by the traditional Muslim elites whose interests lay in the South;

- Tamil ethno-nationalism became progressively communalist over the years, and it turned violently anti-Muslim since the mid-1980s. The myths and symbols of Tamil ethno-nationalism had little or no appeal to the Muslim people. The hard core of Tamil ethno-nationalism was reconstituted by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and other militant groups to serve the ideological needs of the armed struggle. This reconstitution, which involved the adoption of new myths of Tamil heroism and martial exploits, made Tamil ethno-nationalism even more exclusivist;

- the ethnic cleansing campaigns of the LTTE took brutal forms which culminated in the expulsion of the Muslims from their traditional homes in the North in October 1990. Earlier in the same year, LTTE militants massacred 150 Muslims in prayer in two Mosques in the East. Such acts of the Tamil militants gave a strong impetus to communalisation of the Muslim people and therefore strengthened the justification for the SLMC's institutionalisation as a party purporting to represent the interests of the Muslim people.

However, the SLMC is not a Muslim version of the LTTE. It is rather a loose parliamentalist political party which may occasionally use militant slogans and may tolerate extremists within its ranks. The SLMC has still to consolidate a popular mass base and uses 'populist-fundamentalist' slogans as its political strategy. Muslim homeguards have been recruited and armed by the government to confront the Tamil militant army. This was mooted by the SLMC in order to protect themselves in the face of violence and changed circumstances. The consequences of this action have been heavy on both sides.

There is a tendency among critics of 'Muslim fundamentalism'(37) to assert that the rise of fundamentalism among Sri Lanka Muslims is a direct outcome of a global phenomenon. We think this is too simplistic a view. It cannot of course be denied that the rise of

'Muslim fundamentalism' in the Middle East and elsewhere has had an influence on Sri Lanka, but its actual impact has been rather mild until the mid-1980s, when the Muslims in the North and East first experiences the intolerance of militant Tamil ethno-nationalism.

Today with its strategic position in the People's Alliance government, the SLMC has become a political party with young educated youth in its ranks, professing and using religious ideology to satisfy its political agenda. This has to be seen as a distinct departure from the "traditional religious right" groups who have been propagating religion (as faith) in their own design and pace, but not embroiled in direct political confrontation, due to a lack of power and access to resources including the popular media. Political parties or vested interest groups or even powerful individuals may use these groups to further their own political ends; such groups therefore tend to remain on the periphery - of being useful allies - for selected purposes. Nevertheless the SLMC's rise to power has taken place without a mass politicisation process and therefore remains elite oriented, but the potential for mobilisation of such groups through ideological moulding remains strong.

The SLMC behaves as if it is the sole arbiter of Muslim interests and is therefore duty bound to restore the purest and sacrosanct form of Islam to the people through its propaganda. With this motive, it has projected an image whereby the basic democratic freedoms of the individual have been subsumed and collective rights emphasised(38). The pace has already been set, where the party has categorically stated that any changes in the fundamental rights chapter of the Constitution (or introduction of a Bill of Rights) must not perforce allow any individual to challenge Muslim personal law (i.e. Family law) on constitutional grounds. Personal law is being upheld as the fundamental symbol of religious identity. This is clearly seen as an attack on women's rights to equality and identity. This is clearly seen as an attack on women's rights to equality and justice given the fact that personal laws as they now exist are discriminatory towards Muslim women, and no attempt is being made to reform such laws to make it more equitable. When the amendment to the Penal Code of 1883 was presented in Parliament (September 1995), vehement opposition by the Muslim lobby for excluding Muslims from the specific clause which related to violence against women within marriage resulted in a diluted version of the amendment being finally approved(39). It is thus clearly evident that there are calculated moves to legitimate the basis for religious arguments to be used against

Muslim women exercising their rights as full citizens under the constitution.

This brings us to the question of the role of the state as an institution and the contradictory notions of equality and citizenship embodied at different levels of society. Of course the extent to which the State is capable of guaranteeing sexual equality to mean gender considerations across communities will matter only if this is in line with its own political goals. Our past experiences in the post-independence era have shown that the State and State structures have played a complementary role in reproducing and legitimising majority and minority ethno-nationalisms. This has invariably led to a further undermining of gender equity, negating social diversities, while strengthening the communal forces to reaffirm politicised and overarching identities.

## **The challenge of decommunalising the Lankan polity**

The arrival of the SLMC in the political scene marks an important stage in the long process of communalisation of the Lankan society. It would seem that the division of political constituencies along communal lines has now been more thoroughly institutionalised. It was as though a tragic law of history was relentlessly working itself out to a finish. The Sinhala Buddhist nationalists are highly perturbed about the rise of the SLMC. The Tamil nationalists are perturbed too. However, if militant Tamil ethno-nationalism was a logical reaction to the institutionalised Sinhala majoritarian ethno-nationalism, Muslim communalisation was the inevitable response to both Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalisms. Of course one communalism needs the other for survival although it is a game involving unequal players. The net result, however, is further disintegration of the Lankan social fabric and loss of opportunities for social change and progress.

We have heard from numerous Tamils and Muslims in the North-East that the deepening communal divide between the two communities is detrimental to their mutual interests as minorities and as people sharing a common region and language. However, at present, conflicts of interests and mutual distrust rather than

complementarities and mutual trust dominate the political relationship between the two communities. Governments have often cynically exploited the Tamil-Muslim conflict in the North-East for short term political gains. The anti-Muslim behaviour of Tamil militant groups provided the justification for creating Muslim home guards. The escalating militarisation of the Tamil-Muslim conflict is threatening to destroy the collective memory of these two communities of centuries of harmonious coexistence. However, we do not think that this conflict can be resolved in isolation from the larger conflict that engulfs the whole of Sri Lanka. There are no piecemeal solutions to the ethnic conflict that characterise the Lankan national question.

There is a growing awareness among the progressive sections in the country that communalism cannot be eliminated without due recognition of the rights of the different ethnic communities and without creating an environment conducive to the blossoming of cultural and political pluralism. Devolution and power sharing are among the necessary means towards this end. In this regard, a fundamental need is the institutional and ideological reformation of the State to make it an ethnically neutral institution.

Decommunalisation has to be understood as a process encompassing both the State and civil society. It involves the creation of symbols that express the multi-ethnic character of Sri

Lanka. Reforms in the educational system particularly the school curriculum from the primary level upwards to inculcate respect for each others cultures are a prerequisite to eradicate ethnocentrism and intolerance.

Decommunalisation also implies an active reconstruction of ethnic identities not in mutually exclusive terms, but in a spirit of interdependence and mutual enrichment. After all, the history of interdependence and mutual enrichment. After all, the history of interdependence and cross cultural fertilisation between Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims is longer than that of communalisation. Even though communalisation has seriously disrupted the integument of interdependence, the mutualities of survival in multi-ethnic areas serve to heal wounds and harmonise ethnic relations. This history of organic coexistence provides the seeds for regenerating the multi-ethnic consciousness that is no crucial to the formation of an all inclusive Lankan identity. Class and gender are also two key areas which can lend themselves to building multi-ethnic bridges.

The decommunalisation process should effectively challenge the patriarchal values reinforced and sustained by communalism. It has to be linked to the ongoing discourse on human rights and gender relations. Communalism has never been an ally of the struggle for individual freedoms. It rejects or disregards the fact that

individuals have multiple identities in real life.

Decommunalisation, which seeks to provide a broader democratic underpinning to collective identities, should expand the space for the individual to live as a person with multiple identities.

Finally, we wish to reassert that decommunalisation is a process involving mass mobilisation, and attitudinal and institutional changes. While the process has its specific agenda for each ethnic group in Sri Lanka, it is guided by a common vision and a common project, and creating new multi-ethnic symbols. The challenge remains that only a secular State could create and sustain a truly democratic and multi-ethnic polity.

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Alternative perspectives

A Collection of Essays on Contemporary Muslim Society

(1) Throughout this paper, the term 'communal' is used as understood in South Asia where communal identity implies communalist segregation in the pejorative sense. An ethnic group may have a

collective identity which is not communal in this sense.

(2) Ponnambalam Ramanathan was the 'educated Ceylonese' member in the Legislative Council.

(3) This legislation was passed during the time of M.C. Abdul Rahman, the first Mohammedan member in the Legislative Council.

(4) The Dutch initially brought the Code to the country from Batavia [in 1770] as the law pertaining to the followers of the Mohammedan faith. It was Sir Alexander Johnstone in 1806 who formalised the system of personal laws for Muslims with the approval of twenty signatories who were head Moormen of the district of Colombo! Initially the Code was restricted to the Colombo district and was extended to the whole island in 1852.

(5) For a detailed analysis of the evolution of Muslim Personal law and legal status of Muslim women, see National Report - Country Study Sri Lanka, forthcoming publication of Muslim Women's

Research and Action Forum.

(6) The literacy rate of Sinhala women during the time was 25 % (Census report 1921).

(7) Malays originally came as political exiles, but most of them were brought in as soldiers from Somalia, java and Malacca in the late 16th century to help defend Dutch positions in Sri Lanka.

(8) Orabi Pasha was an exile from Egypt who arrived in Sri Lanka with his entourage (1883-1901).

(9) A. Azeez set up the Moors Union in 1900; he was a Trustee of the Maradana Mosque and editor of the "Muslim Guardian".

(10) "... They adopted the doctrine of racial superiority, glorified and idyllic past an associated the Sinhala people with the chosen 'Aryan race' and the chosen Buddhist faith... Racial purity and religious purity were thus combined and the pure Aryan Sinhalese became the appointed guardians of Buddhism" (Jayawardena, 1985).

(11) Govigama (Cultivator) is the uppermost

category in the caste classification of Sinhala social organisation.

(12) Dharmapala founded the newspaper Sinhala Bauddhaya in 1906. See Gunawardene (1985) and Jayawardena (1972 and 1985) for elaborate treatments of the origin and development of the Sinhala Buddhist ideology in the colonial period.

(13) Cited in Gunawardena (1985).

(14) The Muslim population at this time was 6.4 % of the total population, 267,000 at the 1911 Census. Of this 33,000 were Indian Moors, also called Coast Moors.

(15) The Temperance movement was a means to express hostility to the government. Temperance society meetings attracted large crowds in both urban and rural areas. Though primarily religious, the movement was not without political overtones.

(16) Inspired by the Indian National Congress, the Ceylon National Congress was initiated with professed liberal ideals, but could not be sustained

as historical and political circumstances unfolded.

(17) In 1921, the total number of voters was 54,207 which was 5.2 % of the total adult male Ceylon population. By 1914 the number of voters had increased to 189,335 i.e. 18.2 % of the voting population (Roberts, 1979). In 1924, only 900 of the 76,000 Muslims had the right to vote (Rizwie, Muslim Ethnopolitics in Sri Lanka, unpublished thesis, 1970).

(18) The Council debates, Maradana Ordinance July-August 1924 provide some very interesting insights into the tussle for Moor authority and its institutionalisation over the management of the Mosque.

(19) Leader from the Malay community, founder of the Young Muslim League and elected member of the Legislative Council (1924-1927).

(20) This was a precursor to the usage of the term "Moor" and "Mohammedan" interchangeably in the official terminology which had been carried from the Dutch times. A Committee appointed in 1924 to

report on the usage of the term unanimously decided that the correct expression should be "Muslim" to designate a "person professing the religion".  
(Sessional Paper No XXXV, 1924).

(21) SMS formed in 1927 and Ceylon Tamil Congress in 1938 under GG Ponnambalam marks an important point in the communalisation of the Sinhala and Tamil elites.

(22) The focus of the Sinhala leadership in the State Council was to make Sinhala the national language. The motion put forward by J.R. Jayawardene was debated in 1944.

(23) A.E. Goonesinghe founded the Ceylon Labour Union in 1922 - a leading Trade Union in the country at the time.

(24) Given the low level of literacy among the female population spread amongst the various ethnic communities, this qualification would in fact mean that only a marginal population of the highest social class would benefit by this. The equally obnoxious

property clause further reinforces the above.

(25) The Kandyan Political Association kept its distance from the CNC. Their demand was for a federal political structure, following from the grievances caused by the amalgamation of government since 1833.

(26) Vellala is the topmost layer in the Tamil caste hierarchy, to which Ramanathan belonged.

(27) Was a prominent journalist at the time.

(28) Teachers who were learned in Islamic laws.

(29) No documented records are available to assess the number of female voters at this election and the actual number who voted.

(30) WFU comprised of middle class and some professional women who were wives of recognised leaders in national and labour-union activities.

(31) D.S. Senanayake formed the UNP with the CNC.SMS, the Muslim League, the Moors Association and the Colombo Tamil Union. The

UNP's project was really an idealised perception of exclusive Sinhala ethnicity, through evoking the Sinhala heritage. The Indian Tamils were excluded.

(32) This was a coalition of the SLFP, a section of the LSSP and two of the smaller Sinhalese parties.

(33) B. Mahmud was Minister of Education from 1970 to 1977, when standardisation was introduced. It was during this period that Muslim schools were created as opposed to Sinhala and Tamil schools. He also tried his hand at introducing principles of socialism as a subject for the Higher National Certificate of Examination (HNCE) and Muslim Dancing which created a spate of protests from the Community.

(34) At his historical juncture the Tamil leadership was very much Jaffna centric and engaged in consolidating the North-East blocks.

(35) He was from the Pottuvil electorate in the Eastern province.

(36) An agreement between the two governments

(India and Sri Lanka) for repatriation of a section of the Indian Tamils, while the rest would be conferred Lankan citizenship.

(37) The term 'fundamentalism' cannot be defined in simple terms: as far as the paper is concerned we would confine ourselves to mean-political use of religion [i.e. return to a true Islam] that is internally homogenising and externally antagonistic while negating and suppressing the divergent interest and rights of individuals within the collective. The result could be grater or lesser degree of oppression of women.

(38) The issue of collective vs. individual rights is highly complex. In the ethno-nationalist discourse, individual rights are subsumed into a vague notion of collective rights or altogether disregarded. At the other extreme is the liberalist position that rights by definition are individual rights and there is no such thing as collective rights. The correct position however lies somewhere in between.

(39) The Amendment to the Penal Code was brought

before Parliament after a process of consultation with women's groups, medical, legal and other professionals and the National Committee for Women. The bill covered wide ranging issues which had remained untouched for more than one hundred years, from incest, marital rape, sexual harrassment to increasing the age of statutory rape and enhanced punishments. The intention was to recognise rights of women in situations of violence and crisis within the family. The bill which was finally passed recognised marital rape in situations of judicial separation only, which meant that the legislation failed to tackle the real problem of domestic violence in a situation of de facto separation, i.e. where due to irretrievable breakdown of marriage, the parties live separately without obtaining a legal separation. In the case of Muslims there is no concept of legal/judicial separation although breakdown of marriages could result in long years of separation.

## Appendix I

### **The Muslims of Sri Lanka**

#### A brief history of the Muslims of Sri Lanka

#### Introduction

Sri Lanka, known to the ancients as Ceylon, has been recorded in history books as a country that has had many visitations from foreign travellers throughout the ages. The people are mainly Buddhist, with a complex mixture of Hindus, Muslims, Roman Catholics and other Christian denominations. The main race are the Sinhalese while the Tamils, Muslims and Burghers (Anglo-Sri Lankans) form the remaining. The Muslims of Sri Lanka are a very small minority amounting to approximately 10% of a total population of 16 Million people. They claim descendancy from the Arab traders, who made Sri Lanka their home even before the advent of Islam. The Tamils comprise around 25% of the population.

Sri Lankan Muslims can be categorized into two distinct sub groups, the Moors and the Malays. The former is the name given to them by the Portuguese colonial rulers who used the word Moros to identify Arabs in general. The Malays are a group of Muslims who originated from Java and the Malaysian Peninsula. They differed from the Moors, both, in their physical appearance as well as in the language they spoke which was a mixture of Malay and local dialects.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka have a colorful history behind them punctuated by a long spell of hardship suffered during the Portuguese and Dutch occupation of the Island. It is much to their credit that they withstood the onslaught of economic constraints, political intrigues and religious persecution to stay behind and survive. Most other peoples may have packed their bags and left for good. They not only saved their religion from the Christian enemies but also rebuilt the economy, slowly and steadily, by the 18th century when the British took over control of the island from the Dutch.

Being geographically isolated from the main centers of Islamic culture and civilization the Muslims of Sri Lanka were forced to interact closely with their neighbours, the Muslims of South India, in order to preserve their identity. Had they been denied this slender link, it is possible that, they may have lost their distinct Islamic character completely. However, it must be observed that this link has also caused many Indian (Hindu) traditions and rituals to creep into their culture and life style, some of which, even though vehemently anti-Islamic, are still practised to date. Lack of a correct understanding of the teachings of Islam has been the main cause of this sad situation.

Having adapted to the local conditions in various ways and also contributing largely to the Islands economic prosperity, the Muslim community of Sri Lanka, unlike the Hindu Tamils of the Northern Province, has saved itself from any major clash with the indigenous Sinhalese population. They have also been able to receive a fair share in the country Politics and Administration by virtue of their hard work and also of being an important minority whose support has been vital to all the political groups in the country. Although it

may be said that the Muslim community was not politically dominant at any stage, yet, it is certainly true that they manouvered their political activity without much noise, unlike the Tamils.

This work attempts to present a brief history of the Muslims of Sri Lanka from their early Arab trader beginnings to the present day minority community that is fully integrated into the Sri Lankan society.

## **Historical Background**

Sri Lanka (previously known as Ceylon) lies of the south-east of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The pear shaped island, often referred to as the pearl of the east is separated from mainland India by a narrow strip of water called the Palk Straits.

Being in such close proximity to and having such easy access from India, it might be expected that Sri Lanka received a large number of migrants from its neighbour from pre-historic times. The original inhabitants of the island are believed to be an aboriginal tribe called the Veddahs. The Sinhalese, presently the majority community, are supposed to be the descendants of the colonists, led by Vijaya, from the valley of the Ganges who settled in the island around the 6th century B.C. Sinhala, the language of the Sinhalese, is an Aryan language, closely related to Pali. Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa during the period 307-267 B.C.

Trade relations between India and Sri Lanka are traced to the 3rd century B.C. Historians have not been able to pinpoint the actual date of establishment of Tamil settlements in Sri Lanka. However, during the 3rd century B.C. a Tamil General, Elara, set up a Tamil Kingdom at Anuradhapura, in the North Central Province, and ruled there for 44 years. He earned a reputation for his just and impartial administration among the Sinhalese and Tamils and was thus called Elara the Just.

The strategic location of the island, in the Indian Ocean, together with some of the coveted goods it produced, resulted in a fair degree of foreign trade even from ancient times. The Romans discovered the commercial value of Sri Lanka in the first century A.D. and the island was visited by Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, and Chinese traders. Sri Lankas trade offering included Cinnamon, which grew wild in the forests of the wet zone, precious stones, pearls, elephants and ivory.

While most of the traders were only visitors to the island, who made their fortunes and left, it was the Arabs who settled down, making Ceylon their home. Furthermore as the Muslims of Sri Lanka claim their desecndancy from the Arabs it is important to look at the information available on the advent of the Arabs to the island.

### **The Arabs:**

The Tamils of Sri Lanka, throughout history, have attempted to categorize the Sri Lankan Muslims as belonging to the Tamil race. This has been mainly for selfish reasons in a bid to eliminate the minority Muslim community from having its own unique identity. The Government of Sri Lanka, however, treats the Muslims as of Arab origin and as a distinct ethnic group from the

Tamils.

Fr. S.G. Perera in his book -History of Ceylon for Schools-Vol. 1. The Portuguese and Dutch Periods, (1505-1796), Colombo (1955), The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., p 16, writes,

-The first mention of Arabs in Ceylon appears to be in the Mahavansa (Ancient Sri Lankan history) account of the reign of the King Pandukabhaya, where it is stated that this king set apart land for the Yonas (Muslims) at Anuradhapura-

With the decline of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century A.D., Roman trade also died out and the Arabs and Persians filled up the vacuum; engaging in a rapidly growing inter-coastal trade. After the conquest of Persia (Iran), Syria and Egypt, the Arabs controlled all the important ports and trading stations between East and West. It is estimated that the Arabs had settled in Sri Lanka and Sumatra by the 1st century A.D. K.M. De Silvas, Historical Survey, Sri Lanka - A Survey, London (1977), C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., p 50, states,

-by about the 8th century A.D., the Arabs had formed colonies at the important ports of India, Ceylon and the East Indies. The presence of the Arabs at the ports of Ceylon is attested to by at least three inscriptions discovered at Colombo, Trincomalee and the island of Puliantivu-

The manner in which Islam developed in Sri Lanka is very closely similar to that on the Malabar coast of India. Tradition has recorded that Arabs who had settled down on the Malabar coast used to travel from the port of Cranganore to Sri Lanka on pilgrimage to pay homage to

what they believed to be the foot-print of Adam on the top of a mountain, which, until today, is called Adams Peak.

Ibn Batuta, the famous 14th. century Arab traveller, has recorded many facets about early Arab influence in Sri Lanka in his travelogues.

Before the end of the 7th. century, a colony of Muslim merchants had established themselves in Ceylon. Fascinated by the scenic splendour and captivated by the traditions associated with Adams Peak, Muslim merchants arrived in large numbers and some of them decided to settle in the island encouraged by the cordial treatment they received by the local rulers. Most of them lived along the coastal areas in peace and prosperity, maintaining contacts, both cultural and commercial, with Baghdad and other Islamic cities.

According to Tikiri Abeyasinghe in his Portuguese Rule in Ceylon, 1594-1612, Colombo (1966), Lake House Investments Ltd., p 192, tradition has it that,

-the first Mohammadans of Ceylon were a portion of those Arabs of the House of Hashim, who were driven from Arabia in the early part of the 8th. century by the tyranny of the Caliph, Abdel Malik bin Marwan, and who proceeding from the Euphrates southwards made settlements in the Concan in the southern parts of the peninsula of India, on the island of Ceylon and Malacca. The division of them which came to Ceylon formed eight considerable settlements along the Nort-East, North and Western coast of that island; viz., one at Trincomalee, one at Jaffna, one at Colombo, one at barbareen, and one at Point de Galle.-

It is perhaps reasonable, therefore, to assume that the Arabs,

professing the religion of Islam, arrived in Sri Lanka around the 7th./8th. century A.D. even though there was a settled community of Arabs in Ceylon in pre-Islamic times.

The circumstances that helped the growth of Muslim settlements were varied. The Sinhalese were not interested in trade and were content in tilling the soil and growing cattle. Trade was thus wide open to the Muslims. the Sinhalese Kings considered the Muslim settlements favorably on account of the revenue that they brought them through their contacts overseas both in trade and in politics. The religious tolerance of the local population was also another vital factor in the development of Muslim settlements in Ceylon.

The early Muslim settlements were set up, mainly, around ports on account of the nature of their trade. It is also assumed that many of the Arab traders may not have brought their womenfolk along with them when they settled in Ceylon. Hence they would have been compelled to marry the Sinhalese and Tamil women of the island after converting them to Islam. The fact that a large number of Muslims in Sri Lanka speak the Tamil language can be attributed to the possibility that they were trading partners with the Tamils of South India and had to learn Tamil to successfully transact their business. The integration with the Muslims of Tamil Nadu, in South India, may have also contributed to this. It is also possible that the Arabs who had already migrated to Ceylon, prior to Islam, had adopted the Tamil language as a medium of communication in their intercourse with the Tamil speaking Muslims of South India. The Muslims were very skilful traders who gradually built up a very lucrative trading post in Ceylon. A whole colony of Muslims is said to have landed at Beruwela

(South Western coast) in the Kalutara District in 1024 A.D.

The Muslims did not indulge in propagating Islam amongst the natives of Ceylon even though many of the women they married did convert. Islam did attract the less privileged low caste members of the Tamil community who found the factor of equality a blessing for their status and well-being.

There is also a report in the history of Sri Lanka of a Muslim Ruler, Vathimi Raja, who reigned at Kurunegala (North Central Province) in the 14th. century. This factor cannot be found in history books due to their omission, for reasons unknown, by modern authors. Vathimi Raja was the son of King Bhuvaneka Bahu I, by a Muslim spouse, the daughter of one of the chiefs. The Sinhalese son of King Bhuvaneka Bahu I, Parakrama Bahu III, the real heir to the throne was crowned at Dambadeniya under the name of Pandita Parakrama Bahu III. In order to be rid of his step brother, Vathimi Raja, he ordered that his eyes be gouged out. It is held that the author of the Mahavansa (ancient history of Ceylon) had suppressed the recording of this disgraceful incident. the British translaletor, Mudaliyar Wijesinghe states that original Ola (leaf script) was bodily removed from the writings and fiction inserted instead. The blinded Vathimi Raja (Bhuvaneka Bahu II or Al-Konar, abbreviated from Al-Langar-Konar, meaning Chief of Lanka of Alakeshwara) was seen by the Arab traveller Ibn Batuta during his visit to the island in 1344. His son named Parakrama Bahu II (Alakeshwara II) was also a Muslim. The lineage of Alakeshwara kings (of Muslim origin) ended in 1410. Although all the kings during this reign may not have been Muslims, the absence of the prefix -Shri Sangha Bodhi- (pertaining to the disciples of the Buddha) to the name of these kings on the rock inscriptions during this

hundred year period may be considered as an indicator that they were not Buddhists. Further during Ibn Batuta's visit a Muslim ruler called Jalasthi is reported to have been holding Colombo, maintaining his hold over the town with a garrison of about 500 Abyssinians.

In spite of this the Muslims have always been maintaining very cordial relationships with the Sinhalese Royalty and the local population. There is evidence that they were more closer to the Sinhalese than they were to the Tamils. The Muslims relationship with the Sinhalese kings grew stronger and in the 14th. century they even fought with them against the expanding Tamil kingdom and its maritime influence.

By the beginning of the 16th. century, the Muslims of Sri Lanka, the descendants of the original Arab traders, had settled down comfortably in the island. They were very successful in trade and commerce and integrated socially with the customs of the local people. They had become an inseparable, and even more, an indispensable part of the society. This period was one of ascendancy in peace and prosperity for the Sri Lankan Muslims.

### **The Malays:**

Sri Lankan Muslims include the Malays although they form a separate group by themselves. Even the earliest census of Sri Lanka (1881) lists the Muslims as Moors and Malays separately. Malays too, follow the Islamic religion just like the Moors.

The real beginning of the Malays in Sri Lanka dates back to the 13th. century. Husseinmiya writes,

-The definite arrival of Malays in Sri Lanka took place in

the 13th. century. Chandra Bhanu, the Malay King of Nakhon Sri Dhammarat in the Isthmus of Kra on the Malay Peninsula invaded Sri Lanka in A.D. 1247, with Malay soldiers. He was determined to possess the relics of the Buddha from the Sinhalese kingdom. In a second invasion he brought soldiers from India.-

Chandra Bhanus 50 year rule of northern Ceylon in the 13th. century is remembered by such place names as Java Patnam (Jaffna), Java Kachcheri (Chavakachcheri), Hambantota etc. Most authors have, yet, linked the origin of the Malays in Ceylon to the period when the island was ruled by the Dutch. Murad Jayah in -The plight of the Ceylon Malays today-, MICH Silver Jubilee Souvenir, 1944-1969, Colombo (1970), p 70, writes,

-In 1709 Susana Mangkurat Mas, king of Java, was exiled to Sri Lanka by the Dutch with his entire retinue. He was followed in 1723 by 44 Javanese princes and noble men who surrendered at the battle of Batavia and exiled to this country with their families. These families formed the nucleus from which the Malay community grew.-

-The Dutch continued to bring more -Java Minissu- (Malay people) as exiles, and employed them to fill the ranks of the army, the police force, the fire brigade, the prison staff and other services. They formed the bulk of the servicemen during the Dutch occupation and the early British times. The British too imported Malay families for settlement in Ceylon with the idea of raising a regiment. The Kings colors were awarded in 1801 to the Ceylon Malay Regiment, the first Asian to receive that Honor.-

The unsuccessful attempts of the British to attract more

Malays from overseas, the meagre salaries paid to the Malay soldiers coupled with more avenues for lucrative employment in the plantation industry, resulted in the disbandment of the Malay Regiment in 1873. The Malays released from the army were absorbed into the police and the fire brigade services.

The mother tongue of Malays is Malay (Bahasa Melayu). Murad Jayah writes,

-Bahasa Melayu has been preserved in this country for over 250 years due to the fact that the original exiles from Indonesia were accompanied by their womenfolk and it was not necessary for them to find wives among Sinhalese and Tamil women, unlike the Arab ancestors of the Ceylon Moors.-

## Appendix II

# Muslims of Sri Lanka

The island of Sri Lanka, situated in the Indian Ocean, has an extent of an area of 65525 sq. km. The administrative units of Sri Lanka consist of 9 provinces, 25 districts, 160 electorates. Sri Lanka has a multi-ethnic and multi religious population that has made this island their home from antiquity. The census reports of this island have adopted a dual classification of the people in terms of the religion and of ethnicity. The statistics reveal the pluralistic nature of Sri Lankan society and the diffusion and inter-relation of several cultures. The latest census conducted shows that the total population of Sri Lanka is 18.4 million.

Buddhism, which is practiced by the Sinhalese, is the dominant religion constituting 70%. The Hindu religion practiced by the Tamils forms 15%. The Muslims constitute 8% and the Christians 7%. The main languages are Sinhala spoken by Sinhalese practicing Buddhism and Tamil spoken by the Hindus and the Muslims. English is generally used and widely prevalent.

The Muslim community of Sri Lanka consists mainly of the Moors who are the descendants of the Arab traders who settled in this island from 7th century AD, and the Malays who are descendants of Malays who were brought to Sri Lanka by the Dutch. There is also fair number of Indian Muslims who had migrated from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka for purpose of

trade and then settled down.

The Muslims are scattered all over the island and they do not account for an absolute majority (50% plus one) of the population in any district of Sri Lanka. However, in one district, Ampara in the Eastern province they are the largest single ethnic group. In three other districts Trincomalee, Mannar and Batticaloa they account for more than a fifth of the population of the district. These three districts and Ampara, which are in the east of the island, account for only about 1/3 of the total Muslim population. The remaining 2/3 are scattered over the island with more conspicuous concentrations in the Western coastal districts of Colombo, Kalutara and Puttalam and in Kandy in the central highlands. The Muslims are mainly concentrated in urban areas and the one factor, which led to the islandwide scatter, and the urban settlement of the Muslim population is their migration in search of trading opportunities, because the majority of them are engaged in business and trade.

The Sri Lankan Muslims have long been identified as an educationally backward community. Their main interest, it was said, was in business and not in education. In broad terms this is true but the situation is rapidly changing. Now there is a considerable interest in education and an increasing number of students are gaining admission to various faculties of the universities. As a result there are Muslim teachers both male and female and there are also professionals such as doctors, engineers, accountants, managers and academics in different faculties of the national universities. In fact one of the leading surgeons in Sri Lanka Professor A.H. Sherifdeen is a Muslim. Prof. Sherifdeen who is the Professor of Surgery in the University

of Colombo was recently elected as the president of the college of surgeons.

The Muslim community, being a minority, faces number of social, political, economic and cultural problems. The major problem is the preservation of the Islamic identity in pluralistic society. They are also facing many problems in the political field due to the ethnic problem and there are a number who have been driven out from their traditional villages in the North (Mannar and Jaffna districts) due to ethnic war and are living as refugees

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